

# Preparation for international service-learning: evaluating pre-trip cultural training

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## ABSTRACT

As students prepare to enter service-learning experiences, good practice includes preparing the students for entering the service-learning site (Douglas, 2008). This is true when the community partner is accessible and well-known, but can be challenging when the partner is a world away. International service-learning has many affordances, and one important one is immersion. Performing service in another country means that students must literally become part of the world of the recipients of the service, for as long as the service lasts. One lesson from work in another form of experiential education, service-learning, is that cultural preparation is a key to a successful immersive experience.

Service-learning projects can take lessons from study abroad on ways to prepare students to experience and function productively in cultures that diverge from their own experiences. Some forms of preparation that can

be useful include preparation for working on the project, including being prepared to use the technology available in the foreign site. For example, how will you gain background information when the Internet is not readily available? Language preparation is also important, both to communicate needs and to understand the needs of others. The world of the community partner exists in a larger context of state, nation and world region, and students can learn about this in advance of the project. And the community partner may, themselves, have characteristics that it is important to understand. For example, it might be important to understand the underlying beliefs for a faith-based organization.

This paper presents the results of a case study of the efficacy of several types of cultural preparation activities for students who subsequently participated in a service-learning project overseas.

## METHODS

Two sections of a graduate-level course in an applied field were studied. Students in this program all worked in a Central American country, one with an ecological reserve and the other with an indigenous group feeling the effects of economic pressure encouraging cultural change to create a web site.

Beginning three months prior to the trip, students were expected to engage in a variety of cultural preparation activities

- readings
- speakers on culture, history and media
- interview or photography assignment

Qualitative analysis using the constant comparison technique and two coders was conducted on:

- Pre-post questionnaires
- Student reflection journals
- Instructor reflection journals
- Transcripts of three post-trip focus groups
- Instructor photographs and recordings of student actions and conversations
- Themes were identified, and data were grouped by theme in a collaborative process.

## FINDINGS

Preparation was found to influence...

### Cultural Understanding

“But I think what we talked about in our group when we were there was what had us prepared the most is that people kind of scared us into think it was going to be hard and it was going to be rugged, and if we didn’t know that going in, I think there would have been people in our group that were upset that we were sleeping in cots and that it was hot and that there was cold water. But everybody knew that and understood it, so had a really, really good attitude about it when we were there.”

*Focus group transcript. This excerpt shows that for these students, preparation meant that the challenges of living in the environment of the community partner did not get in the way of productive work on site.*

### Community Partner Interaction

“She does not speak any English, and speaks extremely quickly. I introduced the members of my team, which seemed a little overwhelming for her, but also for the members of my team who do not speak Spanish, who looked concerned at even getting out a simple Hola.”

*Student journal. Although the comment is about Spanish, this is more than a language issue. The quality of work on the assignment that required intreaction with someone who might not speak your language or be from your culture was the weakest we received. Having not made the effort to engage with another culture in advance made this interaction awkward and, perhaps, a missed opportunity to begin building a relationship.*

### Project effectiveness

“Also, a lot of planning before can be harmful because I think halfway by Thursday us getting there, we kind of...we shifted everything we were doing, and some people were still confused about the re-shifting of ideas and focusing on, “Well, we talked about this for three months leading up to it,” you know. You had to adjust when you find some things like that. So too much planning can also be harmful because it doesn’t let the creative flow...juices flow once you get there.”

*Focus group transcript. This excerpt shows the difference between project preparation, which the student is speaking about, and cultural preparation. Negotiating meaning across cultures led to revisions in the project conception while on site.*

### Dependence vs. Autonomy

“I know we spent a lot of time on preparation, and I think it helped some, but I don’t think it was enough. I think we needed prep on indigenous issues as well this time, as I ended up supplying it on the fly for the students while we are here, which does sort of contaminate the project.”

*Faculty memo. This excerpt illustrates the balance between student preparation and faculty involvement, particularly in short-term service-learning opportunities. In this case, the focus of preparation did not allow the students to interpret some situations for themselves, which was an opportunity missed.*

### Team Interactions

“I think by the time you’ve reached this point...so some of this, I was like “This is redundant.” We had student, who had never been on a plane before, in our group. Everybody kind of had to rally behind that and kind of take her perspective on things, and I think, because of that, our group kind of came together. I think we were just better prepared after all of that because if she was more comfortable, we were more comfortable.

*Focus group transcript. This excerpt shows how students were initially skeptical about preparation, particularly those who had traveled before, but as the experience proceeded, they saw the value of the prep to the functioning of the group.*

### Enduring effects

“The students seemed slightly taken aback that hiding behind the camera would even be possible. They were clearly being sincere but were also betraying their ignorance. This is interesting as we tried to have them confront culturally trying situations in the fall as part of the fall prep planning. Perhaps they really didn’t step up to the plate in that regard in the fall. Maybe this is something we can better address and plan for next fall.”

*Faculty memo. Hiding behind a camera is an issue particular to communication projects - students will literally put equipment between themselves and the culture they are trying to understand. This excerpt shows that prep makes a difference only when you have student buy-in.*

### Preparation



Student photograph taken at Salvadoran restaurant in Burlington before the trip. This student wrote a caption discussing the role of ingredients like chiles and avocados in Central American cuisine.



Student photograph taken of hispanic shop owner in Burlington before the trip. Students visited sites where they could interact with hispanic immigrants near the university and either conduct interviews or take photographs. Photographs were discussed in class.



Student photograph taken of newspaper kiosk in Burlington before the trip. Although some students did the assignment in a way that involved not having to talk to people, we were still able to use the photos for a discussion of visual culture in that community.

### On-Site



Student breakfast on site at indigenous village. Bread, cheese, handmade pork tamale and coffee. Students participated in making the tamales.



Students conducting video interviews on site overseas. Conducting these interviews involved meeting strangers, requesting interviews and making them comfortable being on camera.



Street in San José, taken first day of trip.